

FROM: WRITING DOWN THE BONES:

FREEDING THE WRITER WITHIN.

BY NATALIE GOLDBERG

## Introduction

I WAS A GOODY TWO-SHOES all through school. I wanted my teachers to like me. I learned commas, colons, semicolons. I wrote compositions with clear sentences that were dull and boring. Nowhere was there an original thought or genuine feeling. I was eager to give the teachers what I thought they wanted.

In college I was in love with literature. I mean wild about it. I typed poems by Gerard Manley Hopkins over and over again so I could memorize them. I read John Milton, Shelley, Keats aloud and then swooned on my narrow bed in the dormitory. In college in the late sixties, I read almost exclusively male writers, usually dead, from England and the rest of Europe. They were very far removed from my daily life, and though I loved them, none of them reflected my experience. I must have subconsciously surmised that writing was not within my ken. It never occurred to me to write, though I secretly wanted to marry a poet.

After I graduated college and discovered that no one was going to hire me to read novels and swoon over poetry, three friends and I started a co-op restaurant and cooked and served natural food lunches in the basement of the Newman Center in Ann Arbor, Michigan. This was the early seventies, and one year before the opening of the restaurant I had tasted my first avocado. The restaurant was called Naked Lunch, after the

novel by William Burroughs—"a frozen moment when everyone sees what is on the end of every fork." In the morning I baked muffins with raisins and muffins with blueberries or even with peanut butter if I wanted. Naturally, I hoped the customers would like them, but I knew if I cared about the muffins, they usually were good. We had created the restaurant. There was no great answer outside ourselves that would get us an A in school anymore. It was the very beginning of learning to trust my own mind.

One Tuesday I was making ratatouille for lunch. When you make it for a restaurant, you don't cut up one onion and one eggplant. The counter was filled with onions, eggplants, zucchinis, tomatoes, and garlic. I spent several hours chopping and slicing. Walking home from work that night, I stopped in the Centicore Bookstore on State Street and wandered up and down the aisles. I saw a thin volume of poetry entitled *Fruits and Vegetables* by Erica Jong. (Jong had not come out with her novel *Fear of Flying* yet and was still unknown.) The first poem I opened to in the book was about cooking an eggplant! I was amazed: "You mean you can write about something like that?" Something as ordinary as that? Something that I did in my life? A synapse connected in my brain. I went home with the resolve to write what I knew and to trust my own thoughts and feelings and to not look outside myself. I was not in school anymore: I could say what I wanted. I began to write about my family because nobody could say I was wrong. I knew them better than anyone else.

This all happened fifteen years ago. A friend once told me: "Trust in love and it will take you where you need to go." I want to add, "Trust in *what* you love, continue to do it, and it will take you where you need to go." And don't worry too much about security. You will eventually have a deep security when you begin to do what you want. How many of us with our big salaries are actually secure anyway?

I have taught writing workshops for the last eleven years at the University of New Mexico; at the Lama Foundation; to the hippies in Taos, New Mexico; for nuns in Albuquerque; to juvenile delinquents in Boulder; at the University of Minnesota; at Northeast College, a technical school in Norfolk, Nebraska; as Minnesota Poet-in-the-Schools; at Sunday-night writing groups in my home, to gay men's groups. I teach the same methods over and over again. It is such basic information about trusting your own mind and creating a confidence in your experience that I have never grown tired of teaching it. Instead my understanding continues to deepen.

In 1974 I began to do sitting meditation. From 1978 to 1984 I studied Zen formally with Dainin Katagiri Roshi (*Roshi* is a title for a Zen master) at the Minnesota Zen Center in Minneapolis. Whenever I went to see him and asked him a question about Buddhism, I had trouble understanding the answer until he said, "You know, like in writing when you . . ." When he referred to writing, I understood. About three years ago he said to me, "Why do you come to sit meditation? Why don't you make writing your practice? If you go deep enough in writing, it will take you everywhere."

This book is about writing. It is also about using writing as your practice, as a way to help you penetrate your life and become sane. What is said here about writing can be applied to running, painting, anything you love and have chosen to work with in your life. When I read several chapters to my friend John Rollwagen, president of Cray Research, he said, "Why, Natalie, you're talking about business. That's the way it is in business. There is no difference."

Learning to write is not a linear process. There is no logical A-to-B-to-C way to become a good writer. One neat truth about writing cannot answer it all. There are many truths. To do writing practice means to deal ultimately with your whole life. If you receive instructions on how to set a broken bone in your

ankle, you can't use those same instructions to fill a cavity in your teeth. You might read a section in this book that says to be very specific and precise. That's to help the ailment of abstract, general meandering in your writing. But then you read another chapter that says lose control, write on waves of emotion. That's to encourage you to really say deep down what you need to say. Or in one chapter it says to fix up a studio, that you need a private place to write; the next chapter says, "Get out of the house, away from the dirty dishes. Go write in a café." Some techniques are appropriate at some times and some for other times. Every moment is different. Different things work. One isn't wrong and the other right.

When I teach a class, I want the students to be "writing down the bones," the essential, awake speech of their minds. But I also know I can't just say, "Okay, write clearly and with great honesty." In class we try different techniques or methods. Eventually, the students hit the mark, come home to what they need to say and how they need to say it. But it is rarely, "Okay, in the third class after we have covered this and this, you will write well."

It is the same for reading this book. The book can be read consecutively and that may be good the first time through. You may also open to any chapter and read it. Each chapter is designed to be its own whole. Relax as you read and absorb it, as by osmosis, with your whole body and mind. And don't just read it. Write. Trust yourself. Learn your own needs. Use this book.

## *Beginner's Mind, Pen and Paper*

WHEN I TEACH a beginning class, it is good. I have to come back to beginner's mind, the first way I thought and felt about writing. In a sense, that beginner's mind is what we must come back to every time we sit down and write. There is no security, no assurance that because we wrote something good two months ago, we will do it again. Actually, every time we begin, we wonder how we ever did it before. Each time is a new journey with no maps.

So when I teach a writing group, I have to tell the story all over again and remember that the students are hearing it for the first time. I must begin at the very beginning.

First, consider the pen you write with. It should be a fast-writing pen because your thoughts are always much faster than your hand. You don't want to slow up your hand even more with a slow pen. A ballpoint, a pencil, a felt tip, for sure, are slow. Go to a stationery store and see what feels good to you. Try out different kinds. Don't get too fancy and expensive. I mostly use a cheap Sheaffer fountain pen, about \$1.95. It has replaceable cartridges. I've bought hundreds over the years. I've had every color; they often leak, but they are fast. The new roller pens that are out now are fast too, but there's a slight loss of control. You want to be able to feel the connection and texture of the pen on paper.

Think, too, about your notebook. It is important. This is your equipment, like hammer and nails to a carpenter. (Feel fortunate—for very little money you are in business!) Sometimes people buy expensive hardcover journals. They are bulky and heavy, and because they are fancy, you are compelled to write something good. Instead you should feel that you have permission to write the worst junk in the world and it would be okay. Give yourself a lot of space in which to explore writing. A cheap spiral notebook lets you feel that you can fill it quickly and afford another. Also, it is easy to carry. (I often buy notebook-size purses.)

Garfield, the Muppets, Mickey Mouse, Star Wars. I use notebooks with funny covers. They come out fresh in September when school starts. They are a quarter more than the plain spirals, but I like them. I can't take myself too seriously when I open up a Peanuts notebook. It also helps me locate them more easily—"Oh, yes, that summer I wrote in the rodeo series notebooks." Try out different kinds—blank, lined, or graphed pages, hard or soft-covered. In the end, it must work for you.

The size of your notebook matters too. A small notebook can be kept in your pocket, but then you have small thoughts. That's okay. William Carlos Williams, the famous American poet who was also a children's doctor, wrote many of his poems on prescription pads in between office visits by his patients.

#### *Detail*

Doc, I bin lookin' for you  
I owe you two bucks.

How you doin'?

Fine. When I get it  
I'll bring it up to you.<sup>1</sup>

You can find many prescription-pad-size poems in his collected works.

Sometimes, instead of writing in a notebook, you might want to directly type out your thoughts. Writing is physical and is affected by the equipment you use. In typing, your fingers hit keys and the result is block, black letters: a different aspect of yourself may come out. I have found that when I am writing something emotional, I must write it the first time directly with hand on paper. Handwriting is more connected to the movement of the heart. Yet, when I tell stories, I go straight to the typewriter.

Another thing you can try is speaking into a tape recorder and feeling how it is to directly record your voice speaking your thoughts. Or you might use it for convenience' sake: you might be working on the hem of a dress and you begin to think how it was with your ex-husband and you want to write about it. Your hands are busy sewing; you can talk about it into a recorder.

I have not worked very much with a computer, but I can imagine using a Macintosh, where the keyboard can be put on my lap, closing my eyes and just typing away. The computer automatically returns the carriage. The device is called "wraparound." You can rap nonstop. You don't have to worry about the typewriter ringing a little bell at the end of a line.

Experiment. Even try writing in a big drawing pad. It is true that the inside world creates the outside world, but the outside world and our tools also affect the way we form our thoughts. Try skywriting.

Choose your tools carefully, but not so carefully that you get uptight or spend more time at the stationery store than at your writing table.

## First Thoughts

THE BASIC UNIT of writing practice is the timed exercise. You may time yourself for ten minutes, twenty minutes, or an hour. It's up to you. At the beginning you may want to start small and after a week increase your time, or you may want to dive in for an hour the first time. It doesn't matter. What does matter is that whatever amount of time you choose for that session, you must commit yourself to it and for that full period:

1. *Keep your hand moving.* (Don't pause to reread the line you have just written. That's stalling and trying to get control of what you're saying.)
2. *Don't cross out.* (That is editing as you write. Even if you write something you didn't mean to write, leave it.)
3. *Don't worry about spelling, punctuation, grammar.* (Don't even care about staying within the margins and lines on the page.)
4. *Lose control.*
5. *Don't think. Don't get logical.*
6. *Go for the jugular.* (If something comes up in your writing that is scary or naked, dive right into it. It probably has lots of energy.)

These are the rules. It is important to adhere to them because the aim is to burn through to first thoughts, to the place

where energy is unobstructed by social politeness or the internal censor, to the place where you are writing what your mind actually sees and feels, not what it *thinks* it should see or feel. It's a great opportunity to capture the oddities of your mind. Explore the rugged edge of thought. Like grating a carrot, give the paper the colorful coleslaw of your consciousness.

First thoughts have tremendous energy. It is the way the mind first flashes on something. The internal censor usually squelches them, so we live in the realm of second and third thoughts, thoughts on thought, twice and three times removed from the direct connection of the first fresh flash. For instance, the phrase "I cut the daisy from my throat" shot through my mind. Now my second thought, carefully tutored in  $1 + 1 = 2$  logic, in politeness, fear, and embarrassment at the natural, would say, "That's ridiculous. You sound suicidal. Don't show yourself cutting your throat. Someone will think you are crazy." And instead, if we give the censor its way, we write, "My throat was a little sore, so I didn't say anything." Proper and boring.

First thoughts are also unencumbered by ego, by that mechanism in us that tries to be in control, tries to prove the world is permanent and solid, enduring and logical. The world is not permanent, is ever-changing and full of human suffering. So if you express something egoless, it is also full of energy because it is expressing the truth of the way things are. You are not carrying the burden of ego in your expression, but are riding for moments the waves of human consciousness and using your personal details to express the ride.

In Zen meditation you sit on a cushion called a zafu with your legs crossed, back straight, hands at your knees or in front of you in a gesture called a mudra. You face a white wall and watch your breath. No matter what you feel—great tornadoes of anger and resistance, thunderstorms of joy and grief—you

continue to sit, back straight, legs crossed, facing the wall. You learn to not be tossed away no matter how great the thought or emotion. That is the discipline: to continue to sit.

The same is true in writing. You must be a great warrior when you contact first thoughts and write from them. Especially at the beginning you may feel great emotions and energy that will sweep you away, but you don't stop writing. You continue to use your pen and record the details of your life and penetrate into the heart of them. Often in a beginning class students break down crying when they read pieces they have written. That is okay. Often as they write they cry, too. However, I encourage them to continue reading or writing right through the tears so they may come out the other side and not be thrown off by the emotion. Don't stop at the tears; go through to truth. This is the discipline.

Why else are first thoughts so energizing? Because they have to do with freshness and inspiration. Inspiration means "breathing in." Breathing in God. You actually become larger than yourself, and first thoughts are present. They are not a cover-up of what is actually happening or being felt. The present is imbued with tremendous energy. It is what is. My friend who is a Buddhist said once after coming out of a meditation retreat, "The colors were so much more vibrant afterward." Her meditation teacher said, "When you are present, the world is truly alive."

## *Writing as a Practice*

THIS IS THE practice school of writing. Like running, the more you do it, the better you get at it. Some days you don't want to run and you resist every step of the three miles, but you do it anyway. You practice whether you want to or not. You don't wait around for inspiration and a deep desire to run. It'll never happen, especially if you are out of shape and have been avoiding it. But if you run regularly, you train your mind to cut through or ignore your resistance. You just do it. And in the middle of the run, you love it. When you come to the end, you never want to stop. And you stop, hungry for the next time.

That's how writing is, too. Once you're deep into it, you wonder what took you so long to finally settle down at the desk. Through practice you actually do get better. You learn to trust your deep self more and not give in to your voice that wants to avoid writing. It is odd that we never question the feasibility of a football team practicing long hours for one game; yet in writing we rarely give ourselves the space for practice.

When you write, don't say, "I'm going to write a poem." That attitude will freeze you right away. Sit down with the least expectation of yourself; say, "I am free to write the worst junk in the world." You have to give yourself the space to write a lot without a destination. I've had students who said they decided they were going to write the great American novel and

haven't written a line since. If every time you sat down, you expected something great, writing would always be a great disappointment. Plus that expectation would also keep you from writing.

My rule is to finish a notebook a month. (I'm always making up writing guidelines for myself.) Simply to fill it. That is the practice. My ideal is to write every day. I say it is my ideal. I am careful not to pass judgment or create anxiety if I don't do that. No one lives up to his ideal.

In my notebooks I don't bother with the side margin or the one at the top: I fill the whole page. I am not writing anymore for a teacher or for school. I am writing for myself first and I don't have to stay within my limits, not even margins. This gives me a psychological freedom and permission. And when my writing is on and I'm really cooking, I usually forget about punctuation, spelling, etc. I also notice that my handwriting changes. It becomes larger and looser.

Often I can look around the room at my students as they write and can tell which ones are really on and present at a given time in their writing. They are more intensely involved and their bodies are hanging loose. Again, it is like running. There's little resistance when the run is good. All of you is moving; there's no you separate from the runner. In writing, when you are truly on, there's no writer, no paper, no pen, no thoughts. Only writing does writing—everything else is gone.

One of the main aims in writing practice is to learn to trust your own mind and body; to grow patient and nonaggressive. Art lives in the Big World. One poem or story doesn't matter one way or the other. It's the process of writing and life that matters. Too many writers have written great books and gone insane or alcoholic or killed themselves. This process teaches about sanity. We are trying to become sane along with our poems and stories.

Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche, a Tibetan Buddhist master, said, "We must continue to open in the face of tremendous opposition. No one is encouraging us to open and still we must peel away the layers of the heart." It is the same with this way of practice writing: We must continue to open and trust in our own voice and process. Ultimately, if the process is good, the end will be good. You will get good writing.

A friend once said that when she had a good black-and-white drawing that she was going to add color to, she always practiced first on a few drawings she didn't care about in order to warm up. This writing practice is also a warm-up for anything else you might want to write. It is the bottom line, the most primitive, essential beginning of writing. The trust you learn in your own voice can be directed then into a business letter, a novel, a Ph.D. dissertation, a play, a memoir. But it is something you must come back to again and again. Don't think, "I got it! I know how to write. I trust my voice. I'm off to write the great American novel." It's good to go off and write a novel, but don't stop doing writing practice. It is what keeps you in tune, like a dancer who does warm-ups before dancing or a runner who does stretches before running. Runners don't say, "Oh, I ran yesterday. I'm limber." Each day they warm up and stretch.

Writing practice embraces your whole life and doesn't demand any logical form: no chapter 19 following the action in chapter 18. It's a place that you can come to wild and unbridled, mixing the dream of your grandmother's soup with the astounding clouds outside your window. It is undirected and has to do with all of you right in your present moment. Think of writing practice as loving arms you come to illogically and incoherently. It's our wild forest where we gather energy before going to prune our garden, write our fine books and novels. It's a continual practice.

Sit down right now. Give me this moment. Write whatever's running through you. You might start with "this moment" and end up writing about the gardenia you wore at your wedding seven years ago. That's fine. Don't try to control it. Stay present with whatever comes up, and keep your hand moving.

## Composting

IT TAKES A WHILE for our experience to sift through our consciousness. For instance, it is hard to write about being in love in the midst of a mad love affair. We have no perspective. All we can say is, "I'm madly in love," over and over again. It is also hard to write about a city we just moved to; it's not yet in our body. We don't know our new home, even if we can drive to the drugstore without getting lost. We have not lived through three winters there or seen the ducks leave in fall and return to the lakes in spring. Hemingway wrote about Michigan while sitting in a café in Paris. "Maybe away from Paris I could write about Paris as in Paris I could write about Michigan. I did not know it was too early for that because I did not know Paris well enough."<sup>2</sup>

Our senses by themselves are dumb. They take in experience, but they need the richness of sifting for a while through our consciousness and through our whole bodies. I call this "composting." Our bodies are garbage heaps: we collect experience, and from the decomposition of the thrown-out eggshells, spinach leaves, coffee grinds, and old steak bones of our minds come nitrogen, heat, and very fertile soil. Out of this fertile soil bloom our poems and stories. But this does not come all at once. It takes time. Continue to turn over and over the organic details of your life until some of them fall through the garbage of discursive thoughts to the solid ground of black soil.



When I have students who have written many pages and read them in class, and the writing is not all necessarily good but I see that they are exploring their minds for material, I am glad. I know those people will continue and are not just obsessed with "hot" writing, but are in the process of practice. They are raking their minds and taking their shallow thinking and turning it over. If we continue to work with this raw matter, it will draw us deeper and deeper into ourselves, but not in a neurotic way. We will begin to see the rich garden we have inside us and use that for writing.

Often I will stab many times at something I want to say. For instance, you can look in my notebooks from August through December 1983 and see that I attempted several times a month to write about my father dying. I was exploring and composting the material. Then suddenly, and I can't say how, in December I sat transfixed at the Croissant Express in Minneapolis and a long poem about that subject poured out of me. All the disparate things I had to say were suddenly fused with energy and unity—a bright red tulip shot out of the compost. Katagiri Roshi said: "Your little will can't do anything. It takes Great Determination. Great Determination doesn't mean just you making an effort. It means the whole universe is behind you and with you—the birds, trees, sky, moon, and ten directions." Suddenly, after much composting, you are in alignment with the stars or the moment or the dining-room chandelier above your head, and your body opens and speaks.

Understanding this process cultivates patience and produces less anxiety. We aren't running everything, not even the writing we do. At the same time, we must keep practicing. It is not an excuse to not write and sit on the couch eating bonbons. We must continue to work the compost pile, enriching it and making it fertile so that something beautiful may bloom and so that our writing muscles are in good shape to ride the universe when it moves through us.

This understanding also helps us to accept someone else's success and not to be too greedy. It is simply that person's time. Ours will come in this lifetime or the next. No matter. Continue to practice.

you are doing your art. But I guess doing art is better than drinking a lot or filling up with chocolate. I often wonder if all the writers who are alcoholics drink a lot because they aren't writing or are having trouble writing. It is not because they are writers that they are drinking, but because they are writers who are not writing.

There is freedom in being a writer and writing. It is fulfilling your function. I used to think freedom meant doing whatever you want. It means knowing who you are, what you are supposed to be doing on this earth, and then simply doing it. It is not getting sidetracked, thinking you shouldn't write any more about your Jewish family when that's your role in life: to record their history, who they were in Brooklyn, on Long Island, at Miami Beach—the first generation of American Goldbergs—before it all passes and is gone.

Katagiri Roshi says: "Poor artists. They suffer very much. They finish a masterpiece and they are not satisfied. They want to go on and do another." Yes, but it's better to go on and do another if you have the urge than to start drinking and become an alcoholic or eat a pound of good fudge and get fat.

So perhaps not all obsessions are bad. An obsession for peace is good. But then be peaceful. Don't just think about it. An obsession for writing is good. But then write. Don't let it get twisted into drinking. An obsession for chocolate is not good. I know. It's unhealthy and doesn't help the world the way peace and writing do.

Carolyn Forché, a poet who won the Lamont Poetry Award for her book *The Country Between Us*, about El Salvador, said, "Change your innermost obsessions to become a political writer." That makes sense. You don't write about politics by *thinking* you should. That will become doggerel. Start caring about politics, reading about it, talking about it, and don't worry about what it will do to your writing. When it becomes an obsession, you will naturally write about it.

## Original Detail

THOUGH THIS IS a short chapter, it is an important one: *use original detail in your writing*. Life is so rich, if you can write down the real details of the way things were and are, you hardly need anything else. Even if you transplant the beveled windows, slow-rotating Rheingold sign, Wise potato chip rack, and tall red stools from the Aero Tavern that you drank in in New York into a bar in a story in another state and time, the story will have authenticity and groundedness. "Oh, no, that bar was on Long Island, I can't put it in New Jersey"—yes, you can. You don't have to be rigid about original detail. The imagination is capable of detail transplants, but using the details you actually know and have seen will give your writing believability and truthfulness. It creates a good solid foundation from which you can build.

Naturally, if you have just been to New Orleans in the dripping August heat and have sucked the fat out of the heads of crayfish at the Magnolia Bar on St. Charles Avenue, you can't have the thick-wristed character in your story in Cleveland on a January night doing the same thing at his local bar. It won't work, unless, of course, you are moving into surrealism, where all boundaries begin to melt.

Be awake to the details around you, but don't be self-conscious. "Okay. I'm at a wedding. The bride has on blue. The groom is wearing a red carnation. They are serving chopped

liver on doilies." Relax, enjoy the wedding, be present with an open heart. You will naturally take in your environment, and later, sitting at your desk, you will be able to recall just how it was dancing with the bride's redheaded mother, seeing the bit of red lipstick smeared on her front tooth when she smiled, and smelling her perfume mixed with perspiration.

## *The Power of Detail*

I AM IN Costa's Chocolate Shop in Owatonna, Minnesota. My friend is opposite me. We've just finished Greek salads and are writing in our notebooks for a half hour among glasses of water, a half-sipped Coke, and a cup of coffee with milk. The booths are orange, and near the front counter are lines of cream candies dipped in chocolate. Across the street is the Owatonna Bank, designed by Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright's teacher. Inside the bank is a large cow mural and beautiful stained-glass windows.

Our lives are at once ordinary and mythical. We live and die, age beautifully or full of wrinkles. We wake in the morning, buy yellow cheese, and hope we have enough money to pay for it. At the same instant we have these magnificent hearts that pump through all sorrow and all winters we are alive on the earth. We are important and our lives are important, magnificent really, and their details are worthy to be recorded. This is how writers must think, this is how we must sit down with pen in hand. We were here; we are human beings; this is how we lived. Let it be known, the earth passed before us. Our details are important. Otherwise, if they are not, we can drop a bomb and it doesn't matter.

Yad Vashem, a memorial for the Holocaust, is in Jerusalem. It has a whole library that catalogs the names of the six million martyrs. Not only did the library have their names, it also had

where they lived, were born, anything that could be found out about them. These people existed and they mattered. *Yad Vashem*, as a matter of fact, actually means "memorial to the name." It was not nameless masses that were slaughtered; they were human beings.

Likewise, in Washington, D.C., there is the Vietnam Memorial. There are fifty thousand names listed—middle names, too—of American soldiers killed in Vietnam. Real human beings with names were killed and their breaths moved out of this world. There was the name of Donald Miller, my second-grade friend who drew tanks, soldiers, and ships in the margins of all his math papers. Seeing names makes us remember. A name is what we carry all our life, and we respond to its call in a classroom, to its pronunciation at a graduation, or to our name whispered in the night.

It is important to say the names of who we are, the names of the places we have lived, and to write the details of our lives. "I lived on Coal Street in Albuquerque next to a garage and carried paper bags of groceries down Lead Avenue. One person had planted beets early that spring, and I watched their red/green leaves grow."

We have lived; our moments are important. This is what it is to be a writer: to be the carrier of details that make up history, to care about the orange booths in the coffee shop in Owatonna.

Recording the details of our lives is a stance against bombs with their mass ability to kill, against too much speed and efficiency. A writer must say yes to life, to all of life: the water glasses, the Kemp's half-and-half, the ketchup on the counter. It is not a writer's task to say, "It is dumb to live in a small town or to eat in a café when you can eat macrobiotic at home." Our task is to say a holy yes to the real things of our life as they exist—the real truth of who we are: several pounds overweight, the gray, cold street outside, the Christmas tinsel

in the showcase, the Jewish writer in the orange booth across from her blond friend who has black children. We must become writers who accept things as they are, come to love the details, and step forward with a yes on our lips so there can be no more noes in the world, noes that invalidate life and stop these details from continuing.